

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 9

The King Marches to the Cross (His Apparent Reception; His Actual Rejection)

Matthew Chapters 21-23

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Introduction

Our Lord's final week before the cross was marked by sharp contrasts. The multitudes cried saying, "Hosanna, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Then only a few days later they cried, "CRUCIFY HIM!" The city of Jerusalem rejoiced at the Lord's triumphal entry; soon thereafter Christ wept over

the city (Luke 19:41). The people eagerly looked for the crown but failed to see their need for the CROSS. They wanted a King who would deliver them from the domination of the Romans, but they rejected a Saviour who would deliver them from the domination of sin. They cried for political freedom, but they cared little that they were in bondage to sin (John 8: 33). They looked for a miracle performing King (Luke 19:37) who could put food in their stomachs (John 6: 26) and heal their sicknesses (Matthew 15:30-31), but refused His personal rule over their lives.

There is an important lesson in all of this. People may cry "Hosanna" (Matthew 21:9), a Hebrew or Aramaic expression which means "save now" (Psalm 118:25-26). However, it is important to ask, What do they want to be saved from? from the Romans? from political oppression? from sin and death? Does a person want political deliverance, financial deliverance, physical deliverance or spiritual deliverance? What kind of deliverance is most important?

Consider a soldier on the battlefield with bombs and bullets and hand grenades flying over his head. In desperation he cries out, "God, save me." What do you suppose he wants to be saved from?

Consider a hospital patient about to undergo open heart surgery. Just as he is about to be put to sleep he cries, "Lord, please save me!" Do you think this person is concerned about being saved from the wrath of a holy God or is he more afraid of the surgeon's knife? The One we should really fear is God Himself (Matthew 10:28), not the person who can merely kill our body. When a person comes to Christ for salvation he can call out to God to save him (Romans 10:13). Yet, he must seriously think about this question: "What am I asking Christ to save me from? Why do I need to be saved? What is my real problem?"

In Matthew chapter 21 the Jews wanted to be saved. They cried Hosanna! (save now!), but they were not crying out for their souls' salvation. No, instead they were crying out for a national salvation from Roman oppression. They did not want to be free from sin; they wanted to be free from the Romans. They did not really want to be under Roman rule, neither did they want to be under Christ's rule of the heart.

The Triumphal Entry of the King (21:1-11)

As we read Matthew 21: 1-3 it becomes clear that the Lord knew exactly what He wanted. He gave explicit and detailed instructions. It becomes obvious that a plan was being carried out according to God's perfect schedule. All this was done so that God's Word might be fulfilled. The exact prophecy which was fulfilled is found in Zechariah 9: 9 (note that verse 9 speaks of the first coming of Christ while verse 10 clearly speaks of His second coming when He will bring peace to the entire earth). Hundreds of years earlier Zechariah had predicted that the Lord would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. This prophecy clearly predicted that this occasion would be the time when "thy King comes to thee." Thus, in Matthew 21 we are

reading about a very unique and special day when Christ the King officially came to Jerusalem. That Christ recognized the full significance of this day is seen in Luke 19:42,44 (and see "notes for further study" at the end of this paper).

Matthew was careful to quote only Zechariah 9:9 (see Matthew 21:5) and not verse 10 which describes the Messiah's peaceful Kingdom and universal rule (which will take place at the King's second coming). The King had arrived, but He did not occupy the King's throne. God will someday fulfill verse 10 just as literally and just as exactly as He has already fulfilled verse 9. [See our paper, *Consistent Literal Interpretation*.]

The people were very excited (Matthew 21:9,11), but the key question is this: Did they really want the King to rule their hearts and lives or did they just want Him to bring relief to their outward circumstances so that they could be more free to do as they pleased?

Compare Matthew 21:9 (the people said, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord") with Matthew 23:39 (the Lord later said that He would not return again to earth until the Jews say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord"). This implies that though the Jews said these words, they did not really mean what they said. These were just words without any real heart commitment. We too need to be careful that our worship is not just mere words which lack reality. God hears what we say, but His real concern is our heart relationship to Him. The same crowd that hailed Him as King on Palm Sunday was the same crowd that yelled "crucify Him" less than one week later!

The King Cleanses the Temple (21:12-17)

In spite of what the crowds were chanting, clearly things were not right in the city of Jerusalem. There were spiritual problems that needed to be dealt with. In the temple, money changers were making a profit and God's house was being made a business place rather than a place of prayer. This situation should remind us to be very careful in and around the local assembly of believers, so that we might be doing the things God has told us to be doing. Can you think of some things that are out of place in God's assembly? There are some things that are not wrong in themselves, but they ought not to be done in the assembly (selling Girl Scout cookies or other items to people in the assembly, filing finger nails, talking about the latest sports game, etc.). It's easy to forget the real purpose of the local assembly.

In verse 15 we see that certain children had more spiritual sensitivity than the Jewish religious leaders. The Lord commends them and rebukes the religious leaders.

The Lesson from the Fig Tree (21:18-22)

The fig tree Jesus cursed was somewhat unusual. Mark records the fact that it was not the season for figs (Mark 11: 13). Leaves and figs generally occur together. To see a fig tree with leaves during this season was remarkable. The presence of leaves is a good indication of fruit: "He came, if haply he might find anything thereon" (Mark 11: 13). The Lord then cursed the fig tree (this does not mean He lost His temper) and declared that there would be no fruit on that tree from that time forth (Matthew 21: 19).

Christ had an illustrative purpose in the cursing. Here was a tree that had the appearance of being prosperous but was actually barren and fruitless. This tree was an illustration of the Jews that rejected the Lord Jesus. The Lord later strongly condemned the self-righteous Jews, in Matthew 22-23, promising them the most horrible judgment. They had an outward appearance of righteousness but upon closer inspection they were full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matthew 23:28).

The fig tree was a picture of the triumphal entry of the King and the welcome He was given (with all the acclaim, etc.). When looked at from afar this welcome looked quite promising. Outwardly it seemed to give every indication that the King was being well received by His own people. It seemed for a moment that John 1:11 would need to be rewritten: He came unto His own and His own gladly received Him as their King! However, upon closer inspection this was not the case at all. The Jewish enthusiasm for Christ would soon vanish and Christ would be rejected, just as John 1:11 says.

What about your life? How does your life seem from a distance? It may look very good. You may seem to be outwardly following the Lord (going to church, etc.), but how well do you do upon closer inspection? Remember, the Lord looks not on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart!

The King Questioned About His Authority (21:23-27)

The religious leaders of the Jews sought desperately to entrap the Lord. Unfortunately they had a habit of falling into their own traps. At times this can be quite embarrassing. On this occasion they questioned the Lord concerning His authority. As was His custom, our Lord answered their question with another question: "The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or from men?" (Matthew 21: 25) The Lord's enemies were unable to answer. If they acknowledged that John received his authority from God then they would have to recognize Christ as the Messiah, as John did. They did not want to do this. If they denied the divine authority of John then they would be in trouble with the people, because John was highly respected among the Jews. They could not answer the Lord, and so He was not obligated to answer them (Mark 11: 33 and Matthew 21:27).

It is very important for people to recognize the authority of Jesus Christ and to submit totally to that authority. Blessed is the man who will gladly bow before the

authority of the King and say, "Lord, what will Thou have me to do?"

The Parable of the Two Sons (21:28-32)

One son refused to work, later repented (changed his mind) and then worked. The other son promised to work but did not do it. The Lord likened the first son to the publicans and harlots who believed John. He likened the second son to the priests, scribes and elders who failed to believe John (and John always pointed to Christ) and who failed to repent (Matthew 21:28-32).

The emphasis here is that self-righteousness will keep a person from the kingdom of God. Those who think that they are fit for the Kingdom in and of themselves are not fit at all!

The Parable of the Householder and the Wicked Farmers (21:33-46)

This parable clearly refers to the prophets who were sent to Israel by God only to be slain: "Ye are the children of them which killed the prophets" (Matthew 23:31). Finally the beloved Son was sent and they killed Him as well, thus vividly portraying Christ's rejection. The Pharisees got the message of these parables (verse 45) and they were greatly convicted and angered, and wanted Christ's blood (verse 46).

It is hard for us to imagine how great their crime really was! God the Father sent His own dearly beloved Son into the world to be the Saviour, and He was treated in a horrible way by His own people, whom He had come to save! And yet how tragic it is when today people wilfully choose to reject the Son of God, even though they have full knowledge of what He has done for them, and they have heard the plan of salvation again and again (John 3:18; John 5:40; etc.).

The Jewish people rejected God's Stone (read Matthew 21:42). In Acts 4:11 Peter told the Jews that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Stone which they rejected ("whom ye crucified"—verse 10). What a marvelous thing God had done! He took that rejected Stone, and by resurrection He made Him the Head of the corner (Acts 4:10-11)! The cornerstone is the most important stone in the whole building! Now the important question is this: What will you do with this Stone? Will you stand firmly on that Stone and let it be your solid foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11; Acts 4:11)? Or, will you be crushed by that Stone as it falls upon you in judgment (Matthew 21:44; John 3:36). Faith is standing on the Rock; unbelief is being crushed by the Rock!

Either you are on the Rock (faith) or the Rock is on you (judgment)! Where are you in relationship to this Rock? You can trip and fall on this Stone and be broken (stumblingblock--see Matthew 21:44; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8; Isaiah 8:14-15); you can let it fall on you and be pulverized by it (Matthew 21:44); or

you can plant your feet on its firm foundation and let it support you (1 Peter 2:6)!

Don't reject God's Rock! Rely and rest upon it! "On Christ the solid Rock I stand!
All other ground is sinking sand!" (Edward Mote)

The Parable of the Marriage Feast (22:1-14)

Here the king's servants were rejected and killed resulting in the King's fierce anger and the destruction of the guilty ones.

The religious leaders felt the thrust of these parables and perceived that Christ was speaking against them (Matthew 21:45). In this they were correct. These parables exposed the enemies of Christ and revealed the judgment which must of necessity result from the rejection of the Messiah.

God's Kingdom and Caesar's Kingdom (22:15-22)

The Pharisees and Herodians were sent by the priests, scribes and elders (Mark 11:27) with the purpose of entrapping the Lord in His speech (Matthew 22:15). They pretended to respect Christ for who He was (Matthew 22:16) but the Lord knew their hypocrisy (verse 18 and Mark 12:15).

"Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?" (Mark 12:14) An affirmative response would offend the people who were burdened with the Roman yoke. A negative response would not be pleasing to the Roman officials, and Christ could be charged with insurrection. The Lord responded immediately and pointedly (Matthew 22:18). He asked to see the tribute money (Matt. 22:19) and they brought to Him a penny (a denarius). After they identified the image on the coin He said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (verse 21). This answer silenced the questioners and sent them on their way (verse 22). Our Lord gave full respect to Rome (compare Rom. 13:1-7) as well as to God. The very fact that His questioners brought forth the Roman coin proved that they had themselves accepted the Roman rule and were living by it. As such "they could not take hold of His words before the people" (Luke 20:26). They were obligated to render unto Caesar what was rightfully his. To fail to do this would be to endanger their own relationship with the Roman officials. They were also obligated to give to God what is rightfully His. It was here that they were lacking.

Every person first and foremost has responsibilities to fulfill before God. Our duty to God is of utmost importance. When we give God His rightful place, then we learn how to be responsible to others that God has allowed to be over us such as governmental officials, parents, teachers, policemen, pastors, etc. The Jews in the days of Christ refused to give their Messiah His rightful place in their hearts.

Jesus Answers the Sadducees (22:23-33)

The Sadducees once approached the Lord Jesus with a problem selected from a situational ethics textbook! These religious liberals, dressed in pious hypocrisy, asked the Lord a question about something which they didn't even believe in (Matt. 22:23). It involved the resurrection of the dead. Their question was absurd and their error was that they did not know the Scriptures, nor the power of God. If they had a knowledge of Biblical truth the resurrection would be no problem to them. If they knew the power of God they would not get so hung up on the supernatural. Their concept of God was very corrupt. Christ taught them the truth concerning the resurrection (22:30). He then dealt with their primary problem--unbelief in the resurrection itself. In doing so He pointed them to the account of the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3. It was there that God spoke to Moses saying, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). [Notice the verse does not say, "I was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."] Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all died long before the time of Moses, when God spoke these words. If God was the God of the living (and who would deny that?) then the fathers must have been living when God spoke those words. This was proof, therefore, of life after death (which the Sadducees denied). The Lord's argument was received favorably by the listening crowd (verse 33).

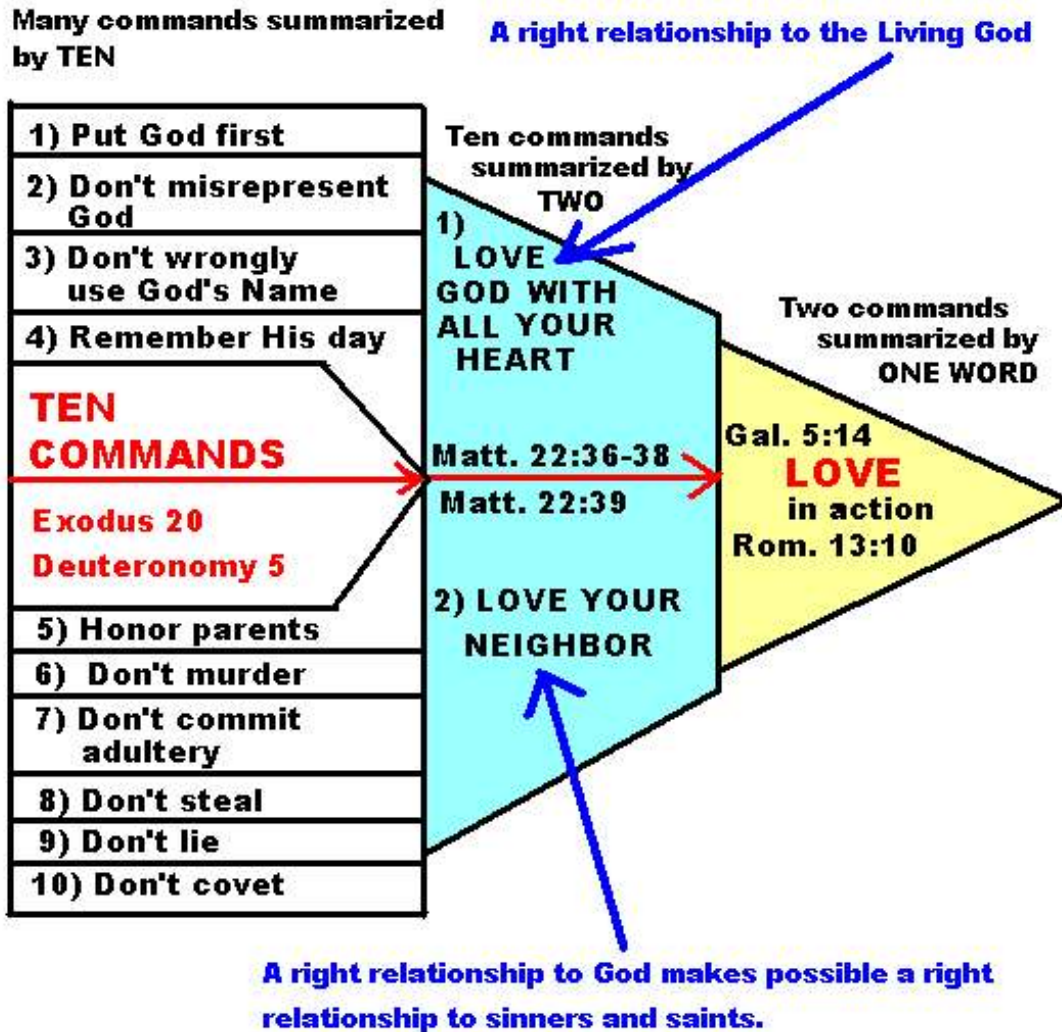
Notice that these were religious people who did not believe the Bible at all. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of men; they denied hell; they did not believe in angels, etc. Compare Acts 23:8. The Bible clearly teaches these truths, but the Sadducees denied these clear teachings of Scripture. Likewise today many clergymen deny that the Bible is without error; they deny the deity of Christ; they deny hell, and they deny many other foundational errors. If the Lord had come to our world today, instead of to the first century world, He would be just as unpopular among the religious leaders, and He would be rejected just as much as He was 2000 years ago. Things have not changed. Unbelieving men have not changed.

Jesus Answers the Pharisees (22:34-46)

Next, the Pharisees came along to test or quiz the Lord. These men were devoted to hair-splitting legalism. They carried on lengthy debates about the commandments, arguing whether any particular one was great or small, heavy or light. It was natural that they often debated the question as to which commandment in the law was the greatest commandment. Keep in mind that there were 613 commandments in the law of Moses, and of these 248 were positive commands and 365 were negative commands.

The Lord gave a most memorable, beautiful reply. The greatest commandment sums up all of the Godward duties; the second greatest sums up all of the manward duties. If these two laws are carried out, then all of the 613 will be

carried out as well. Of course, the problem is that sinful man will miserably fail to do both of these key commands, and this is why he needs a Saviour! The Jewish religious leaders were about to prove how much they did not love the Lord their God—they would soon crucify God’s only Saviour!



Starting in verse 41 the Lord Jesus Himself took the offensive and asked them a question: What do you think of the Messiah? Whose Son is He? They said, "The Son of David" (all Jews recognized that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David because the Old Testament Scriptures made this clear). Then the Lord asked them why David, in Psalm 110: 1, called the Messiah "Lord." How can David's Son be David's Lord? They could not answer this question.

At a later time the Apostle Paul clearly answered this question that the Pharisees could not answer. Paul's answer is found in Romans 1:3-4. According to His humanity, Jesus was the son of David (according to the flesh), but according to His deity, Jesus was the Son of God, and thus David's LORD!

It's very important that we have a right concept and understanding of Who Jesus

Christ really is. He is perfect Man and perfect God. He is the GOD-MAN. He was always God (John 1:1-2) but He became man (John 1:14).

The Sins of the Pharisees (23:1-36)

In this chapter we have the Lord's strong words of denunciation. He pronounces "seven woes" upon the scribes and Pharisees, those religious, self-righteous leaders who were leading the people astray. The Lord always had mercy and compassion on those who were down and out sinners, but He had nothing but severe condemnation towards these religious leaders who outwardly seemed to be upright and exemplary Jews. However, the Pharisees were hypocrites, and if we could look past their masks, we would see that inwardly they were full of sin.

Here are some of the sins of the Pharisees that are mentioned in Matthew 23:

1. They failed to practice what they preached (23:3).
2. Their preaching reached everyone but themselves (23:4).
3. They loved the praise of men (23:5-7).
4. They deceived and were themselves deceived (23:13).
5. They pretended to be righteous while living unrighteously (23:14).
6. They fervently made disciples who were headed for hell (23:15)
7. They rejected the higher authority (23:16-22).
8. They obeyed the minor points of the law but disobeyed major commandments (23:23-24).
9. They nurtured a clean appearance to cover inward iniquity (23:25-28)
10. They professed innocence but were guilty murderers and enemies of God's servants (23:29-36).

The language the Lord used against these Jewish religious leaders is quite remarkable. He pronounced "woes" upon them (verses 13, 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). He called them snakes and vipers (verse 33). He called them hypocrites (verses 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). He called them "blind" (verses 16, 17, 19, 24, 26). He called them "fools" (verses 17, 19). He called them murderers (verses 34-35). He promised them that they would not escape "hell" and "wrath" and "damnation" (verses 14, 15, 32-33). It is a very serious matter to God when a person is in a position of leadership in which he, by his teaching and by his example, leads people to hell. God has no toleration for this.

The Lord's Lament Over Jerusalem (23:37-39)

Verse 37 is a key verse. In the midst of the terrible depravity and sin of man, the Lord Jesus still had a heart of compassion for His people. Notice the contrast, "I would...ye would not." "I was willing...you were not willing!" God would have sheltered His people under His wings, and protected them, but they were not willing to come to God. They proved this by the way they treated God's messengers, the prophets. As a result, there was no choice for God except to bring judgment upon Jerusalem: "Behold your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23: 37). This was literally fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans came and destroyed the temple and the city under General Titus.

In spite of all this, the Jewish people still have hope. They still have a future. Even though the kingdom of God would be taken away from this Christ-rejecting generation of Jews (Matthew 21:43), yet there is coming a future generation of Jews who will not reject the Messiah, but will receive Him. This will take place prior to the Second Coming of Christ. There is a future generation of Jews who will truly say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord" (Matthew 23: 39). The Lord will return the second time to a repentant nation. Study Zechariah 12: 10-14. The future restoration of Israel is clearly taught in the Bible. Spurgeon observed:

I think we do not attach sufficient importance to the restoration of the Jews. We do not think enough of it. But certainly, if there is anything promised in the Bible it is this. I imagine that you cannot read the Bible without seeing clearly that there is to be an actual restoration of the children of Israel...May that happy day soon come!

--Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

When Christ came unto His own the first time they rejected Him (John 1:11), but when He comes unto His own the second time (following the great tribulation), they will receive Him as their Messiah and as their Saviour. In the next chapter (Matthew 24) the Lord Jesus will explain and give details concerning that great time of tribulation which will come upon the earth prior to the Lord's second coming.

Thus this section of Matthew has many contrasts. It begins with the Jewish people rejoicing because the King has come into their city; it ends with the King weeping and lamenting over the sin of the people and announcing His quickly approaching judgment upon the city of Jerusalem.

At the beginning the people seemed to be embracing the Messiah, but as we continue reading through these chapters we discover that their true attitude was one of rejection.

So it is in our day as well. There are people who outwardly seem to embrace

Christianity, but on closer inspection we learn that they actually reject the Christ whom they profess to believe in. They honor Him with their lips but their heart is far from Him. They put on a good outward show, but there is no inward reality to go with it. They have a form of godliness but they reject the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5). God is looking for truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:5).

Notes For Further Study

Matthew 21:1-11. For a study on the royal entry of Christ, see our *Life of Christ* studies, chapter 10. For the significance of the day of Christ's triumphal entry, consider the following: Many Bible students identify this day as being the fulfillment of the unique prophecy in Daniel 9:25 which says that there will be 69 weeks (483 years) from the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem to Messiah the Prince. They say that the 483 years came to an end exactly on the day of Christ's triumphal entry as indicated by Luke 19:42, 44. This may be correct, although it is not easy to calculate Daniel's prophecy to the exact day. For further study see Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince*, Alva J. McClain, *Daniel's 70th Week Prophecy* and Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*.

Matthew 21:22. God is not a benevolent genie, giving us whatever we ask Him for. This verse assumes that the believing heart is delighting in God (Psalm 37:4) and asking according to the Father's will (1 John 5:14-15). May we desire and ask for only those things which will honor God and exalt His Name.

Matthew 21:29. This verse illustrates the fact that repentance involves a change of mind. Some Bible teachers err because they make repentance a change of life. They confuse repentance with the fruits of repentance (compare Luke 3:8-14).

Matthew 22:13. Many in the "free grace" movement have made "weeping and gnashing of teeth" a punishment for saved people (for carnal believers). They claim that the expression "weeping and gnashing of teeth" involves profound regret and remorse and sorrow, and they teach that unfaithful believers will in some way be excluded from the Kingdom or from the joys of the Kingdom, and will suffer great remorse and regret. This is a wrong interpretation. A careful study of the expression will show that "weeping and gnashing of teeth" involves anger, rage, pain or anguish, and that this will be the fate of the unsaved, not the fate of saved people. For a detailed study, see our paper, "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth—Will This Be the Fate of True Believers?"

Matthew 22:21. The Lord was not opposed to His people paying taxes. See also Matthew 17:27.

Matthew 22:23. For more information on the Sadducees, see our notes on The Life of Christ, chapter 1, or consult a good Bible dictionary.

Matthew 22:26. If I had been the seventh husband, I would have thought twice

before marrying this woman, given the history of the first six! Everyone that married her seemed to die!

Matthew 22:29. The greatest source of error is ignorance of the Scriptures. If we fail to understand what God has said, then we are going to go astray. See 2 Peter 3:15-18.

Matthew 22:42-45. The question the Lord asked is answered in Romans 1:3-4. It is essential that we understand the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ. He was David's Son from Bethlehem; He was God's Son from all eternity. He became the Son of David by human birth, but He did not become the Son of God. Benjamin Warfield has said it well:

He who always was and continues to be the Son of God was manifested to men first as the Son of David, and then, after His resurrection, as also the exalted Lord. He always was in the essence of His being the Son of God; this Son of God became of the seed of David and was installed as--what He always was--the Son of God, though now in His proper power, by the resurrection of the dead. [Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), p. 81]

It is helpful to compare this passage in Romans chapter 1 with what is said of Christ in John chapter 1. "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). "The Son...was made of the Seed of David" (Rom. 1:3). He existed as the Word long before He became flesh (see John 1:1-2). Likewise, He existed as the Son long before He became David's Seed according to the flesh. In John chapter 1 it is said that He who was God became flesh. In Romans chapter 1 it is said that He who was the Son of God became the Son of David. At the incarnation the eternal Word became flesh and the eternal Son became a Man. The eternal God did not become the Son. On the contrary, "we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, without ceasing to be God." [Taken from *the Doctrinal Statement of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America.*]

Matthew 23:3. The Lord recognized that there are people who do not practice what they preach.

Matthew 23:12. Pride was the chief sin of the Pharisees. Compare Luke 18:89-14.

Matthew 23:37. God's willingness stands in sharp contrast to man's unwillingness: "I would....ye would not." See also John 5:40. This contrast is seen throughout the Bible. See our paper on *God's Willingness and Man's Unwillingness*. God is willing to do amazing things for mankind, but sinful men refuse His gracious offer!